

By Jeff Gardner (National Catholic Register)

WASHINGTON -- Since the June 30 withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq's urban centers, the level of violence in Iraqi cities has risen sharply. For almost six years, Iraq's Chaldo-Assyrian Christians have been caught in the eye of this violent storm.

On Aug. 19, truck bombs in Baghdad, killing almost 100 and wounding some 600, prompted Chaldean Auxiliary Bishop Shlemon Warduni to tell Catholic News Service that "we are losing everything ... we can't pray; we can't work; we can't even walk."

Now, a proposal that would give Iraq's Christians control over their traditional homeland in the north, the Nineveh Plain, has moved a step closer to fruition thanks to a promise of at least \$20 million in U.S. aid.

Called the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit, the proposal, first put forward in 2003, would establish a region in northern Iraq where the country's Christians could return, resettle and rebuild their lives.

According to Michael Youash, project director for the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, a Washington-based think tank that has lobbied hard for U.S. support of the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit, the Nineveh Plain is not an independent state "or some sort of Iraqi-Christian reservation."

"Rather," Youash said, "this initiative would constitutionally define an area in northern Iraq where Christians and other minorities could elect local councils to deal with matters such as education, public works, health care and security."

Perhaps most importantly, he remarked, "The establishment of the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit would give the region's governance a share of Iraq's national revenue. That governance, those councils and representative bodies, could then decide what to do with that money."

The region marked out for the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit is a vertical strip of land that starts around Arbil and stretches north by northeast, past Mosul and up to the border with Turkey.

"This is a complex but essential undertaking," said Younadam Kanna, a Christian member of the Iraqi parliament and chairman of the Assyrian Democratic Movement. Kanna joined the Assyrian Democratic Movement in 1982, taking up an armed struggle against Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime. Since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Assyrian Democratic Movement has been a major force behind working to establish the administrative unit.

"We are talking about a region of some 5,000 square kilometers (approximately 3,107 miles), with a population of nearly one-half million people," Kanna said.

"But," he said, "this area is not exclusively made up of or just for Christians. It is populated by a mosaic of peoples -- Arabs, Shiite and others, too, who are suffering. We need to find a solution for all."

'Jump Start'

Iraqi Assyrians living in the U.S. agree that something must be done.

Fred Aprim, an Iraqi Assyrian writer and activist living in California, became concerned about Iraqi Christian refugees in 1991 after the first Gulf War. Traveling to Jordan, Aprim saw thousands of Iraqi Assyrian refugees who had fled the country because of the war.

"After visiting with these Assyrian families," Aprim recalled, "I returned to my hotel room, sat down and began to cry."

Noting that the situation in 2009 is much worse for Iraqi refugees than it was in the 1990s, Aprim declared flatly, "We must help the Assyrian Christians to stay in Iraq and not leave. The Assyrian people should not be left to disappear, merely represented through monuments, busts and artifacts in museums."

"What has unfolded in Iraq is that Sunni and Shiite Muslim factions seemed to have agreed on one thing -- attacking the Christians," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Ill. "As the U.S. mission in Iraq draws down, we must leave behind a homeland for Iraq's Christians. This is an idea whose time has come."

Kirk, a commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve who has served in Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti and Bosnia, recently offered an amendment to the State-Foreign Operations Appropriations Act, authorizing at least \$20 million to help take "the first step toward establishing an autonomous administrative unit for Chaldo-Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain."

When asked why he proposed the funding, which has passed the House of Representatives and will likely be passed by the Senate this fall, Kirk said he felt compelled to respond to abuse of fellow Christians.

"It would be a real tragedy if the U.S. involvement in Iraq led to a new democratic government, but no remaining Christian minority," he said.

As to whether or not more funding might be needed to establish the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit, Kirk commented, "This \$20 million is seed money. As we draw down in Iraq, we need to give Iraqi Christians a jump start to protect themselves."

Future Conflicts

Christians have been fleeing at a rapid rate. According to United Nations estimates, since 2003, Iraq's Christian population has declined from 1.5 million to less than 1 million. Those who have stayed behind are literally fighting for their lives.

While there is agreement that self-governance for Iraq's Christians is a good idea, the question of who will stay in the Nineveh Plain until the administrative unit becomes a reality is less certain. Iraq parliament member Kanna, while thankful for U.S. support, is adamant that the United States and other Western countries stop encouraging Iraqi Christians to immigrate.

Not everyone in the Chaldo-Assyrian community agrees that staying in Iraq and dying for the cause is acceptable.

Reacting to Kanna's plea to halt immigration, Father Michael Bazzi, rector at St. Peter Chaldean Catholic Cathedral in El Cajon, Calif., said bluntly, "Shame, shame on him!"

"When these people are persecuted, their priests and bishops are killed -- where would you have them settle?"

Born in 1938 in Telkeppe, Iraq (near Mosul), Father Bazzi sees to the pastoral and corporal needs of Iraqi Chaldean refugees throughout San Diego County, which is the country's second-largest concentration of Iraqi Christians, next to the Detroit metro area.

"Immigration in the U.S. is doing a beautiful job," Father Bazzi said. "Over a short period of time, almost 3,000 Iraqis have come to this area."

Most refugees, Father Bazzi pointed out, arrive scared and with no money. What little they had

has been spent getting out of Iraq.

"What are they (the politicians) doing for anybody?" Father Bazzi asked. "Nothing."

While in favor of the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit in theory, Father Bazzi is critical of expecting Iraqi families to pay the price.

It would be good to have "our own region, a place where we have Christian rules and rulers, where we could talk and pray in our own language," he said, but, he emphasized, "people cannot be used as place holders."

Uniting both sides of the issue is a sense of urgency that something get done. Kirk noted, "In the short term, if we do not act to protect the Christians in Iraq, they will become refugees to the U.S., and they do not want to be."

Perhaps most importantly, Kirk stressed, "We (the U.S.) ignore what must come next in Iraq at our own peril. Two wars are enough. Ignoring what must come next for Iraq's Christians will lay the foundation for future conflicts."